

A Weekly Message of Torah from Rabbi Rick Rheins

A Good Silence and a Bad Silence

This Shabbat is often referred to as *Shabbat Nachamu*, the Shabbat of consolation and compassion. The name derives from the *Haftarah* portion from the Prophet Isaiah (40:1-26) who uttered this heroic message of comfort and hope as he tried to rally our people after a tragic defeat and the destruction of Jerusalem:

נְחַמוּ נְחַמוּ עַמִּי יֹאמֶר אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:
Comfort, oh comfort My people,
says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and declare to
her that her term of service is over, that her iniquity is expiated
(Isaiah 40:1-2).

While Isaiah offered inspired words to soothe the pain of loss, we must often find solace in the eloquence of silence. Indeed, at every service we pause and take the time for silent meditation. Traditionally, it is a time for private recitation of the Amidah. I know that I am not alone in finding that one of the great attractions to the synagogue and to Jewish worship is that there are designated times of silence. It is during these precious moments of quiet that we can tune in to hear that inner voice, the קוֹל דְּמַמַּח דַּכָּה, (*kol d'mamah dakah*) the still, small voice within that is all too often obscured by the sheer volume of modern life.

My teacher and mentor, Rabbi Jon Stein, taught a very interesting distinction between “good silence” and “bad silence.”

A good silence, a worthy silence, is one that gives us a chance to reflect and to honor. One form of this good and timely silence is when we express our sympathy to a mourner in ways beyond words; letting our acts of compassion and empathy speak for us.

On the other hand, silence in the face of evil reduces one a co-conspirator. When we stand idly by as our neighbors suffer, we are complicit in their suffering. Indifference erodes our spirit and the foundation of a just society.

Though the major national elections are well over a year away, we can already feel as if we are in the heat of a political campaign season. We witness signs all around us that the inflammatory rhetoric of partisan politics is creating deep rifts in our society. For far too long, Republicans and Democrats have been engaging in tactics that demonize political opponents and we are all the poorer for it. Even more frightening, unless we can generate a greater willingness for compromise, for cooperation, and for respectful dialogue, the serious problems our nation faces will continue to get worse and cause widespread suffering.

I for one am no longer willing to stay silent. From now on, when I hear someone engaging in overwrought rhetoric demonizing an American political leader or candidate, I will politely ask that they tone it down. I will point out that the men and women that I meet who serve as political leaders of this country, Democrats and Republicans, are almost without fail, caring, hardworking and dedicated people. I may disagree with this one's policies or that one and --- I'll vote

accordingly. But to castigate one with whom I disagree, to demonize and mock them, is crossing the line.

In a blessed silence one can hear the divine message of holiness: tenderness, compassion, forgiveness and life-affirming love. But in a dismissive and contemptuous silence, we can perceive the signals that give consent to racism, anti-Semitism, bigotry and intolerance.

Yes, there is a time for silence and a time to speak. And every moment is a time for listening.

This Friday night, at our *Erev Shabbat* service (6pm), we'll have the chance to hear from our new 6th District Congressman, Jason Crow. In turn, this is also a time for the Congressman to see and hear our concerns about the state of the union, the growing incidents of anti-Semitism here and around the world, and our concerns for the security and support for the Jewish nation of Israel.

As we listen respectfully to what he has to say, let our silent but rapt attention be a role model of civility that transcends partisanship.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rick

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